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ABSTRACT

A study evaluated a new freshman writing course offered to students at the University of Minnesota who were underprepared for study at a major research university. In the fall of 1997 it was proposed that all freshmen be placed in for-credit, strengthened, basic writing courses rather than placing certain students in non-credit, pre-college-level remediation courses. The study then examined course completion rates, students' attitudes toward the courses, students' performance in future courses, and growth in student writing. At the end of the first year, 87 percent of students had successfully completed the basic writing course. Additionally, when students were asked to compare the basic writing course with similar high school courses, the results showed that they were completing the basic writing course because they felt challenged and not because the course was easy. A review of students' grades in other writing courses found that students taking the basic writing course were well prepared for future composition courses. And student papers rated by trained raters showed that students were performing important writing tasks at the expected level. The study concluded that the new writing program was achieving its goal of preparing all freshmen for basic writing at the college level. (CH)

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Evaluating Freshman Composition: A Multimethod Approach

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Eighth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 17-20, 1998.
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Dolores Vura
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Evaluating Freshman Composition: A Multimethod Approach

Abstract

This paper describes 4 studies that were used to evaluate the freshman writing courses offered to basic writers at a major research university. The evaluation was prompted by an institutional decision to eliminate post-admission writing placement and place all freshmen into college level writing courses. The studies investigated course completion rates, performance in subsequent courses, student opinion of course difficulty and analysis of student writing. The studies suggest that the courses are effective in achieving their goals.

General College (GC) at the University of Minnesota is the first home for 800-900 new freshmen each year. The college's mission is to provide the first year of instruction for students who are underprepared for study at a major research university. During their year in GC, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to perform in a challenging, yet supportive environment.

All students in GC are required to take 2 quarters of freshman composition. Both courses are college level, credit-bearing courses (as determined by the State Higher Education Coordinating Board). The decision to place all GC freshmen directly into a college level writing curriculum regardless of admissions test scores and high school rank was a radical one, given the nationwide support for mandatory remediation programs (Grabel, 1988; Rounds & Anderson, 1985). Evaluations of the curriculum have demonstrated, however, that the vast majority of students, even those considered very underprepared students, can successfully complete the curriculum with college level writing skills.

The history of the decision

In the mid-1980s, GC faculty in the writing area became convinced that the college's writing program was not working. At that time entering students were given a paper-and-pencil reading test (the Descriptive Test of Language Skills) and a writing test (the Written English Proficiency Test). Based on the results of those tests, students were recommended for pre-college or college-level reading courses, and pre-college or college-level writing courses. At least 60% of entering freshmen were placed in pre-college-level courses. While placement was not mandatory, many students did follow the placement suggestions and enrollment in pre-college-level reading and writing courses

was high. The college's reading and writing courses were administered through learning assistance centers and involved combinations of self-paced and classroom instruction. Faculty were skeptical of the curriculum because the placement process had not been validated by research, the courses in the program did not appear to be of good quality, the rate for non-completion of the courses was high, and there was no evidence that students who completed the courses performed better in subsequent writing courses.

Two possible solutions to the problem were discussed. The first solution, the one adopted by most institutions (and mandated by some state legislatures) was to strengthen the placement process and the curriculum. The most credible writing placement technologies at the time were based on holistic scoring of essays. This process was very expensive to implement and there was no guarantee that the validity of the placement process would be significantly improved. The faculty made efforts to strengthen the pre-college-level courses, and while completion rates improved, students were unhappy about the non-credit status of the courses, and the faculty remained unconvinced that they were necessary. The issue came to a head when the director of the learning assistance center, who was the main supporter of the placement process, left the university. The faculty had to decide whether to fix the existing system or revise it completely.

The writing faculty proposed that the placement process be eliminated and that all freshmen be placed in a strengthened basic writing course. The rationale for the decision resided in emerging theories of writing process (cf. Bartholomae, 1986, and Rose, 1983). These theories suggested that immersing students in the writing process was a more effective way to develop writers. The course proposed would meet for 6 hours per week (for four credits) with 18 students per section in computer classrooms featuring

interactive software. Students who failed to complete the basic writing course would register for a non-credit, independent-study writing course that would be supervised by staff in the writing center. Students would receive a passing grade for basic writing upon completing the latter course.

Two concerns emerged about the plan. The first concern was whether a basic writing course could be designed that would be rigorous enough to be considered college level and therefore worthy of credit. The second concern was whether underprepared freshmen could pass such a course. The first concern was addressed in a preliminary way when the state of Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) endorsed the course as college-level. Both questions have been addressed through research that has examined course completion rates, students' attitudes toward the courses, students' performance in future courses, and growth in student writing.

Course completion

The curriculum was first offered to students in the fall of 1987. Anecdotal evidence from writing teachers suggested that the curriculum was working, and at the end of the year, about 87% of students had successfully completed the basic writing courses. These completion rates have been sustained over subsequent years. For example, in 1995 Wambach and delMas examined the grades of GC students registered in GC courses taught in day school between fall 1993 and spring 1994. Information on grades was obtained from the U of M Student Registration database. Grades of A,B,C,S, and D are considered passing. Grades of F, N, I, and W are considered not passing. About 87% of GC students passed the courses (see Table 1), which is higher than the average completion rate for all courses in the college (75.8%).

Table 1: Course completion rates for first and second quarter freshman composition

Course	Grade of A,B,C,S	Grade of D	Grade of F,N,I,W	Total enrollment
First Quarter Writing (GC 1421)	575 85.4%	13 1.9%	85 12.6%	673
Second Quarter Writing (GC 1422)	522 85%	18 2.9%	74 12.1%	614

The extended course evaluation

Information on the extent to which students believed their writing courses to be challenging was gathered as part of a larger survey of students' beliefs about the curriculum. In the spring of 1995, students enrolled in General College were asked to compare their GC courses to those taken in high school (Wambach, Thatcher & Woods, 1996). The survey asked students to compare how the GC courses they were currently enrolled in compared to high school courses and for their overall impressions of their GC courses. GC instructors distributed the surveys in their courses during the last week of the quarter as part of a routine course evaluation. Responses were received from 136 students enrolled in GC 1422, second quarter writing. The respondents represent about a third of the students enrolled in the course that quarter. Since the surveys were completed anonymously as part of the course evaluation process, it was not possible to compare the characteristics of respondents and non-respondents. Participation in the

survey was affected by absenteeism from class and instructor willingness to participate. Thus the respondents represented a large, but not a random sample of GC students.

Question 3 on the survey asked students to rate "How does the difficulty of the homework assignments in this course compare to the difficulty of the homework assignments in a similar high school course?" Students in 1422 reported that the course was much more difficult than high school writing courses (see Table 2). Students were also asked to compare the amount of work required to complete projects and papers in this course to the amount of work required to complete projects and papers in a similar high school course. Students in GC 1422 indicated that they were doing much more work in this course than they had in their equivalent high school courses. Results from the survey suggested that most GC students were challenged by their experiences in writing courses, suggesting that students completed the courses even though they were challenging and not because they were too easy.

Table 2. Comparison of GC 1422 to high school writing courses

Survey Question	Much less than high school	About the same as high school	Much more than high school
How difficult was the course?	5 3.7%	38 27.9%	93 68.4%
How much work did you do in this course?	6 4.4%	27 19.9%	103 75.7%

Grades in other writing courses

While data on course completion and student perceptions suggested that the writing courses were challenging students and effectively retaining them, questions remained about the extent to which the courses were effectively preparing students to write in subsequent courses. In order to address this issue, a study was conducted to determine whether or not General College composition courses prepared students for future composition courses at the University of Minnesota (delMas, 1994). The University of Minnesota registration database was used to identify all students who had taken advanced composition courses including COMP 1027, RHET 3562, or any 3000-level COMP course. The data set was then limited to those students who started at the University as of fall 1987 or later. Fall 1987 was selected because it represented a point in time when GC 1422 was being taught in a way similar to the approach used at the time of the study. Finally, not all 3000-level COMP courses were used in the study. Several courses had either no or only a few (1 to 5) students who started in the General College. These courses were eliminated from the data set. The final result was a data set with 9,164 students, 553 of whom started in the General College and who had taken GC 1422, second quarter writing.

Table 3 presents a picture of the grade distribution among the different advanced composition courses. The vast majority of students (60% or more) earned grades of B or higher. Several things are worth noting in Table 3. The most common advanced composition courses for GC students appear to be COMP 1027, COMP 3014, and RHET 3562. GC students do well in these courses, with about 70% earning As or Bs in the two COMP courses, and 81% earning As or Bs in RHET 3562. Table 4 points out that while

GC students don't perform as well as non-GC students in their first advanced composition course, GC student performance is still quite high and comparable (75% As and Bs for GC compared to 88% As and Bs for non-GC students).

delMas also looked at the relationship between GC 1422 and composition course grades, presented in Table 5. Here, grades in GC 1422 are crosstabulated with grades in the first composition course a student took after taking GC 1422. It is rare for a student to earn a D or F in a composition course, regardless of the student's grade in GC 1422. The likelihood of earning a grade of A does increase, however, as grade in GC 1422 increases, as does the likelihood of earning a B or higher in the composition course. This is probably the strongest evidence that suggests a positive relationship between GC 1422 and future composition course performance.

Table 3: Distribution of grades in composition courses for students who started in General College.

Composition Course	Sample Size	% A	% B	% C	% D	% F
COMP 1027	126	16	54	26	2	2
COMP 3011	37	22	49	27	0	3
COMP 3012	19	16	47	37	0	0
COMP 3013	32	19	66	16	0	0
COMP 3014	117	16	53	29	1	1
COMP 3015	17	12	65	18	0	6
COMP 3022	21	10	71	19	0	0
COMP 3027	80	16	61	23	0	0
COMP 3031	16	31	56	6	0	0
COMP 3033	32	34	50	16	0	0
RHET 3562	106	25	56	15	0	3

Table 4: Comparison of grades in first composition course (other than GC 1422) between students who started in General College and those who did not.

Started in GC	Sample Size	% A	% B	% C	% D	% F
YES	553	18	57	22	1	1
NO	8,611	39	49	9	1	1

Table 5: Comparison of grades in GC 1422 with grades in first composition course after taking GC 1422.

		Grade in Composition Course				
GC 1422 Grade	Sample Size	% A	% B	% C	% D	% F
A	81	32	54	14	0	0
A-	81	19	64	14	0	4
B	150	15	61	23	1	1
B-, C+	91	7	62	29	1	2
C, C-, D	32	13	41	44	3	0

While this study suggested that students who successfully completed GC 1422 were well prepared for future composition courses, it did not tell us if the GC 1422 experience was responsible for students' future success. It could be that students who go on to advanced composition courses are already good writers before entering college, and that successful completion of 1422 is simply another measure of this prior preparation.

Analysis of student writing study

The most recent study of the college writing curriculum has been an examination of the development of students' writing skills (Adler-Kassner, Reynolds & delMas, 1996). While prior research has suggested that students successfully complete the writing courses, find them challenging, and go on to successfully complete advanced writing courses, we did not have evidence that students' writing actually improved through their experience in the course. The purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that student writing is affected by experience in GC writing courses.

All students enrolled in GC 1421 and GC 1422 during winter quarter 1996 were asked to participate in the writing program study by allowing writing program staff to photocopy course papers for rating. For students enrolled in GC 1421, three papers were photocopied (papers one, two, and four); for students in GC 1422, two papers were photocopied (papers two and four). Only students whose sets of papers were complete for each class were included in the study. From the several hundred complete sets of papers, a sample of 56 sets was drawn from 1421 and 110 sets were selected from 1422 for analyses. The sample sizes were determined by the budget allotted for payment to raters. Students of color were over-represented in the sample. In other respects, the sample formed a group that was statistically indistinguishable from those not included in terms of grade point average and demographic indicators.

The papers were evaluated by trained raters during the summer of 1996. Raters were hired from among staff in Commanding English, an ESL-based program in General College. The raters were chosen because, while they were familiar with the theory and practice of basic writing and basic writers, they were not entirely familiar with the writing program's focus and assignments. Raters were trained in early June. The training period included rating exercises that were designed to increase the reliability of ratings. After their training, they rated approximately twenty papers daily for ten days. During the period they were rating papers, the study authors met with the raters every other day to address pertinent questions. Raters received papers with assignment sheets stapled to the front and were trained in finding relevant criteria from those sheets for their rating. Raters were asked to evaluate four aspects of each paper:

1) length of paper (one question);

2) structure, development, and organization (four questions);

3) use and documentation of sources (two questions);

4) surface issues (one question).

Each aspect was rated on a six-point scale running from 1 (very little or no evidence of the identified characteristic) to 6 (exceptional evidence of the identified characteristic). A rating of 3 was assumed to be the mid-point, or average, rating on the scale. A rating of 6 was assigned when the paper clearly went beyond the expectations stated on the assignment sheet; a rating of 1 was assigned when it clearly was far below those expectations. Papers were rated in random order and were not identified by course, section, instructor, or order of assignment. Any identifying information about the student writer was removed.

Inter-rater agreement was between 79% and 86% for each area rated. The rating assigned for the analysis was the average of the two raters' scores.

Results of the study suggested that most students wrote a paper that was the appropriate length for the assignment (neither too short nor too long), and that the number of students meeting this criterion did not change as the students moved through the curriculum (see Table 6).

Table 6: Percentage of students who wrote papers of an appropriate length (for the assignment):

Course	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 4
1421	74%	81%	64%
1422		74%	68%

One of the surprising findings of this study was that the average ratings for first papers in GC 1421 were at expectation. Given that this group of students scores lower than average university freshmen on standardized tests of verbal ability (their mean score on the ACT English test was 18.9), we expected to see lower ratings of initial writing samples. Ratings of structure and organization, use and documentation of sources, and surface features remained nearly constant in GC 1421 and GC 1422 (see Table 7). Both at the beginning and end of the courses, students average ratings were 3 or 4, which is at expectation. At the end of 1421, students were improved from 3.6 to 4 on structure and organization. Virtually no improvement was seen in ratings of use and documentation of sources or surface features. At the end of GC 1422, students average score on structure and organization improved very modestly from 3.6 to 3.8. Ratings of use and documentation of sources and surface features changed slightly in a positive direction.

One explanation for the lack of observed change is that it takes a great deal of practice to improve one's writing. Ten weeks of course work is probably not enough to create significant improvements in this skill. Another explanation is that the writing tasks assigned in the courses tended to increase in difficulty and complexity throughout the quarter. In GC 1421, for example, the first paper is a narrative, autobiographical writing assignment while the fourth paper is a research report.

Table 7: Mean ratings for papers' structure and organization, use and documentation of sources and surface features in GC 1421and GC 1422.

Criterion	1421			1422	
	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 4	Paper 2	Paper 4
Structure and Organization					
The paper clearly addresses the assigned question	3.8	4.0	4.1	3.8	3.9
Easy to infer from the first page the main point of this paper	3.9	4.0	4.4	3.9	4.1
The paper's progression proceeds from, furthers, and is logically connected to the main idea announced on the first page	3.4	3.7	3.6	3.4	3.7
The evidence used in this paper supports the thesis effectively	3.5	3.6	3.8	3.4	3.6
Use and Documentation of Sources					
The paper presents, analyzes and discusses sources effectively according to the instructions on the assignment sheet	3.5	3.1	3.5	3.1	3.3
The evidence in the paper is appropriately documented according to the instructions on the assignment sheet		3.2	3.3	3.1	3.2
Surface Features					
The paper has an appropriately low incidence of composing and editing errors	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.4	3.5

Conclusions

The series of investigations described above have persuaded the faculty that the decision to place all GC freshmen in a college-level basic writing sequence was appropriate. Students complete the courses, find them challenging, are prepared for future courses and show evidence that they are performing important writing tasks at expectation. This information gives us confidence to continue to improve our writing program within it's existing framework.

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